NEWSWEEK
22 OCTOBER 1979

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS. *By Thomas Powers. 393 pages. Knopf. $12.95.*

Graham Greene can relax. This history of master spy Richard Helms by a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist is not one of those works of fact that rival cloak-and-dagger fiction. Rather, it is an intelligent collection of mostly well-told tales about the CIA—its cold-war origins, oddball personalities, plots against Castro, connections with Watergate—culled from private interviews, public records (the Rockefeller Commission, a special Senate committee, the Pentagon papers) and previously published works about intelligence and Watergate by more than 80 authors. Instead of derring-do or dramatic deductions, Powers provides the bureaucratic background—or at least as much, he acknowledges, as those who know are willing to tell.

ILL FIT: Helms is not an easy subject. The man who kept the CIA's secrets under Congressional questioning—and pleaded nolo contendere to criminal charges as a result—remains a mystery himself. Powers says that Helms was always dubious about the value of covert operations and secret fiddling, yet the record shows his name connected with just about every controversial CIA project that has come to light—secret drug-testing, mail-opening, at least one plot against Castro, political interference in Chile and help for Richard Nixon's White House plumbers. The urbane Helms also enjoyed the loyalty and respect of many colleagues and a Who's Who of influential men about Washington. But most of the personal details that Powers produces make him seem curiously ill fit for sensitive intelligence work—slow to reach hard decisions, quick to compromise with powerful opponents, a passer-on of other people's papers and a promoter of incompetents. Perhaps this is the kind of man who succeeds in a modern intelligence establishment—or perhaps there is still more to Helms than we know.

Few anecdotes about the man exist, another serious problem for the author, and those that do add little to Helms's image. After Lyndon Johnson promoted Helms to deputy director in 1965 (making him the first career CIA officer to rise that high), he invited him to a dinner at the LBJ ranch; at the table, Sen. Eugene McCarthy twitted the twenty-year veteran of intelligence work. Did he know the wine being served? Helms did not. The sauce on the dishes? Sorry. The flower in the centerpiece? No, again. "McCarthy nodded in a knowing manner, and remarked that James Bond would have done better."

BORED: More seriously, Powers suggests, Helms as CIA director was not precisely suited to those high councils where intelligence intersects with national policy. Says Powers, "He knew all there was to know about operating a secret intelligence agency, but he was bored by arguments over precedence in the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, or the exact characteristics of some new Soviet missile. Participants in meetings of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) would sometimes notice Helms, USIB's chairman, staring dreamily off into space . . . His relative lack of interest made him vulnerable at the National Security Council."

Powers did talk with Helms—and this version of his career will probably have to stand until Helms writes his own. For one thing, Helms furiously denies the notion (put about in a novel by Nixon aide John Ehrlichman) that he blackmailed Richard Nixon into making him U.S. ambassador to Iran. But Powers speculates that Nixon, typically, might have presumed such a threat and discussed it with Ehrlichman. Powers also dismisses the suggestion that the CIA itself hatched the Watergate plot to topple Nixon, and he concludes that the agency's comic-opera campaign to assassinate Castro was carried out under orders from John and Robert Kennedy. If Helms had ever attributed the Castro plot to the Kennedys, Powers writes, "he not only would have been the target of some extremely caustic comment, but from that day forward he would have lunched alone."

Once the CIA's dirtiest secrets—its so-called "Family Jewels"—were out, Powers says, Helms felt isolated and confused. Why was he suddenly being blamed for practices accepted for a generation by the powerful few who knew about them? He despised the new CIA director, William Colby, for spilling so much in hopes of restoring the agency's credibility, and he thought Frank Church and some other senators on the CIA's trail were showboating hypocrites. Surely, Helms believed, the senators knew the need for dark deeds, the pressure for them from the highest levels of government—and the need to keep things secret.

CURTAIN OF ILLUSION: In the end, Powers concludes, Helms kept the CIA's secrets to protect himself, salvage what he could of public trust in the CIA and maintain that curtain of illusion essential to intelligence operations. But the times had changed enough so that Helms could not go unpunished; he eventually was fined $2,000 and sentenced to two years in jail (suspended). Powers sees a proper public revulsion at the "callous, reckless and offhand" use to which the CIA has been put in the past. But he has the sophistication to wonder whether—after all the shouting, charter-rewriting and Congressional watchdogging is done—things will ever be very different.

DAVID M. ALPERN